THE PEASANTRY OF FRANCE

Inquiry Shows the Existence of Errors as to Land-Holding in that Country.

Owners of Small Farms Are Not so Numerous as Has Been Supposed, but the French Agriculturist is a Contented Person.

Special Correspondence of the Sunday Journal.

PARIS, March 1.—Some of our notions about rural France will have to be revised. It has been popularly supposed that the extensive subdivision of agricultural land in this country was due primarily to the revolution of a hundred years ago. There can be no doubt that the popular uprising of that period, with its political and material changes, were somewhat of a help toward this end, but that they could not have been the chief factor is shown conclusively by the single circumstance that when the revolution broke out it found amongst the twenty-five millions of the population at that period about half as many small landowners as there are estimated to be at present in a population of thirty-eight millions. As a matter of fact peasant proprietorship as it exists in France is a legacy from the far distant past. It existed and was recognized side by side with feudalism, and it has reached its present unparalleled dimensions because, since feudalism was abolished, the political and material conditions of France have become gradually more and more favorable to it.

Another notion needed to be modified is that which conceives of small proprietors as holding a larger area of the agricultural land of France than is held by proprietors of more importance. It is easy to be misled in this matter. There are portions of France, and the fairest and richest portions, of which such a conception would be unquestionably true, and the notion receives additional favor from those general statements which are afloat, like that, for instance, which puts the aggregate of landowners at 8,000,000, and another which states that one-half of the agricultural surface is tilled by the families to whom it belongs. When, however, we dive into figures a little, what we discover is that holdings of less than fifteen acres amount to only about a fourth of the country's surface, while those exceeding 120 acres cover more than a third of it. We also find that holdings which range between these figures exceed considerably in the acreage they cover both the smaller and the larger estates; making it obviously true, as French statisticians have repeatedly maintained, that France, as regards the division of its land, may more properly be classed as a country of medium holdings than as a nation which is either dominated by big landlords or cut up into peace-meal for the sole benefit of little ones.

PRODUCTIVENESS OF THE FARMS.

Two other notions challenge attention both of which will have to be changed somewhat if they are to harmonize strictly with the facts. One is the popular idea that under a system of small and medium holdings the land will be cultivated better, and hence be more fruitful than under a different system—such a system, for instance, as that obtaining in England. In a new country like our own, where the soil has only to be tickled with the plow to smile annually with a bountiful harvest, such a result from small proprietorship might be naturally counted upon, but where the soil is old and so nearly exhausted as to need artificial stimulus, and, therefore, capital and skill, to bring it into a state of, even moderate fruitfulness, it is very easy to see, upon reflection, that the small, semi-impoverished owner, who must rely solely upon his own limited resources, is at a disadvantage. Not only is this what might reasonably be expected, but the figures show that it is the actual result; that, too, whether small holdings in France are compared in their productiveness with larger holdings of the same sort of land in the same country, or whether agricultural France is lumped together and compared in this matter with nations which pursue their farming under a different system.

So likewise must our notions as to the degree of material prosperity accruing to small proprietors be modified somewhat. Settled upon a few acres, a small family may manage to live, but if they depend solely upon what their little patch of land affords them, they will live a hard life, with scarcely any comfort, and in mean and squalid surroundings. This is the condition of a large part of the French peasantry at the present day. It is quite true that most of them lay by a little for the future, but they do this by a sort of instinct, and the reason they are able to do it is that rather than leave the future in uncertainty they will steal a little from present necessaries. Allowing for exceptions, we have not found that, as regards the supply of their material wants, the French peasantry, as a whole, are much, if any, better off than the farm laborers of Great Britain. Their food is coarse in the extreme and they are often very meanly domiciled. The cleanliness and brightness one sees so generally in laborers' cottages in England are rare indeed in France. M. Blouet, who is surely a good authority, tells us that the average French peasant will live on 8 or 10 cents a day, and another writer, M. Betham-Edwards, who has traversed the entire country, says that thousands of French peasants must have seen for the first time, at the Paris exposition of 1889, those conveniences of modern life which, in all well regulated families are held essential to both health and decency.

IMPROVEMENTS IN RURAL LIFE.

Perhaps we are laying too much stress upon these things. For fear of being misunderstood, we hasten to say that rural life in France has undergone vast improvement within twenty years, and that the trend is now more decidedly onward and upward than ever before. You can still find sections where the rude bed adorns an alcove in the kitchen, and where, as in the earliest times, horses are used to tread out the corn; and also many parts where illiteracy is common, and where the people live in the coarsest manner and do their work without the least regard for modern improvements. But in these days education is penetrating into the most remote hamlets, and Jacques Bonhomme, under the influence of this and other civilizing forces, is beginning to think that there is more in this life even for him than to grub and save, and then die, leaving similar conditions to his offspring. Moreover, farm wages are improving. For the lowest form of farm drudgery they have quadrupled within fifty years, the ruling rate now being from $80 to $120 a year with board, the latter sum, which is very high for France, being the wage commanded by those "aristocrats of the farm," the shepherds. After all, too, there is hardly any pauperism in agricultural France, though there is poverty and plenty of hard scratching. And when you consider that Honest Hodge, if he lives to be very old, is very likely to end his days in the poorhouse, while Jacques Bonhomme is almost certain to breathe his life away under his own roof tree, with his own kindred about him, it would seem as though any substantial comparison between the peasantry of France and the farm laborers of England were quite out of the question.

That the French peasants themselves are measurably content with their lot is shown in numerous ways. One proof of it is afforded in the complacency with which they look upon governmental affairs. It is not in clustering hamlets that French revolutionists are bred, but in the close, fervid atmosphere of great cities. Far from being a revolutionist, the French peasant is not even a politician. It used to amaze us that the popular vote, drawn so largely from this class, could change so soon from its emphatic indorsement of Napoleon III to its equally emphatic countenance of existing republican forms. On the face of it, this would suggest vacillation and rural unrest. But as a matter of fact, it indicates the opposite of all this. It shows, when one gets an inside view, that French peasants take little interest in such things, that they are wholly wrapped up in the hum-drum life of the vineyard and the farm, and so absorbed in making a living, and living by a little for old age, that elections mean to them little more than an acquiescence in whate er form of government may happen for the time to be in power. Anything seems to suit them politically so long as it allows them to go on quietly with their ordinary pursuits. When Napoleon asks for their support they think of nothing beyond saying, "Yes," and when Paris and other centers, having overthrown the empire, ask them to indorse a republic, the response naturally is the same. This, at least, is how it has been in the past, though one cannot help thinking that twenty years of prosperous republican rule must have awakened in many of these rustic Frenchmen a pronounced liking for this simpler form of government, and that the increased enlightenment these years have brought will lead them hereafter to increased political activity.

FLEEING TO THE CITIES.

In France, as in other nations, the complaint is common that rural districts are undergoing a slow process of depopulation. In two respects, however, France differs in this matter from both Germany and England. We have not heard that in either of these countries there is any scarcity of births amongst the rural population; rather the contrary, whereas in France the birth rate is as low in many of the rural districts as in any of the centers of urban life, and the average of children per family no higher in some parts than in the exceptional town of Roubaix, where the last census puts it at one. Not only so, but we are assured by a writer in the Nation that in many cases the ascertained cause of this is the desire of parents to better their own condition; in other words, French thrift. Another point to be noted is that, while the country districts of England and Germany, especially the latter, are being largely drawn upon by foreign emigration, France is suffering from this cause scarcely at all—a fact, by the way, which speaks suggestively of the superior contentment of the French.

The great drain in France is, not from that country to some other, but from the rural districts towards the great cities, especially towards Paris. With increasing education there has sprung up in the rural breast a feverish craving for enlarged opportunities. It is discovered, too, that cities offer an increased wage, and, without thinking how much that is beyond price they must give up in the exchange of farm life for factory life, great numbers of the younger peasantry, infatuated with this prospect of higher pay, are gravitating yearly to the actual, and too often, the sad realization of what it means. Unfortunately, too, the universal conscription for military service has a depleting effect upon country life; that too, not only in the fact that it takes young men off for three years just at the time they would naturally be settling down to family life, but in the further fact that it weans them from country attachments, and makes them at home afterwards only in such scenes of bustle and pleasure as the big city offers. This is the complaint in France, and the facts to which it has reference are decidedly suggestive, showing as they do that in our present-day civilization city life is more than a match for country life in its power to dazzle and draw, even when farm life can offer as a special attraction the possible ownership of a small strip of land.

But as to the latter point, there are many peasants who are not land owners. To say that one-half of the soil is cultivated by those who are proprietors of it is to say much, but not all, for the other half has yet to be accounted for. This we find is occupied by two classes—three-fourths of it by those paying a regular rental and the remaining one-fourth by what are called metayers; that is, those who, for the privilege of farming it, halve the products they realize with its owners. To indicate still further how farming operations are carried on it should be noted that in some cases a number of metayers take a holding together, bringing their combined capital to bear in the effort to make it profitable. It should also be noted that in districts where the holdings of land are generally small it is not unusual for neighbors to own a horse and a cow in jointure, and that associations are common in such districts for the purchase and hiring out of improved agricultural machinery, and for the granting on rare occasions of such small loans as may be needed while the impecunious peasant waits for his crops to ripen.

In social life the French peasantry are pre-eminent for the sobriety they exhibit; that, too, spite of the fact that in some parts their staple beverage is home-made wine. In morals they are far superior, as a rule, to city folk; so much so that an intelligent and sympathetic writer, referring to their modern tendency to imitate city folk, says that if the peasantry only knew how superior they are to the rest of France, this craze would receive an effectual quietus. In religion the French peasants are, of course, predominantly Roman Catholic, with, however, a fair intermingling of Protestants, and it is pleasant to know that in most parts the rural representatives of these two sects are on friendly terms with each other.

HENRY TUCKLEY.

Dear, Dear.

Detroit Free Press.

A whole peck of trouble has appeared in connection with the woman's congress to be held in Chicago during the world's fair. It was the original intention that men should have nothing whatever to do with this congress. It was to be exclusively a woman's affair. But now an exasperating dilemma presents itself. Most of the music, which was to be composed by women, to be used in the great song service of the congress, is arranged for both male and female voices. Men must be admitted to the choir or the song service will be knocked galley west. Was there ever anything more trying?

Editor Shanklin's Lament.

Evansville Courier.

There is nothing left unread by the Democratic press against the recent federal appointments, not that the men themselves are incapable, but there seems in each case to be special reasons why the appointments should not have been made. The cry for an explanation is answered by the universal confession that none can give an explanation that would seem rational. The appointments appear to be a deliberate warning that loyalty is no longer considered a virtue, and that the best way to acquire the favor of those in power is by opposition.

RAILWAY TIME-TABLES.

Indianapolis Union Station.

Pennsylvania Lines.

Trains Run by Central Time.

TICKET OFFICES at Station and at corner Illinois and Washington Streets.

TRAINS RUN AS FOLLOWS: *Daily. †Daily, except Sunday.

FROM INDIANAPOLIS TO	LEAVE	ARRIVE
Columbus, Ind., and Louisville	*3:40 am	*12:15 am
Philadelphia and New York	*5:00 am	*10:15 pm
Baltimore and Washington	*5:00 am	*10:15 pm
Dayton and Springfield	*5:00 am	†10:15 pm
Martinsville and Vincennes	*8:00 am	*5:15 pm
Madison and Louisville	†8:05 am	†6:00 pm
Richmond and Columbus, O	*8:00 am	†3:45 pm
Logansport and Chicago	*11:20 am	*3:55 pm
Dayton and Columbus	*11:45 am	*7:55 am
Philadelphia and New York	*3:00 pm	*10:30 am
Baltimore and Washington	*3:00 pm	*10:30 am
Dayton and Springfield	*3:00 pm	*10:30 am
Knightstown and Richmond	†4:00 pm	†9:00 am
Columbus, Ind., and Louisville	*4:00 pm	*11:15 am
Martinsville and Vincennes	†4:05 pm	†10.55 am
Columbus, Ind., and Madison	†4:30 pm	†10:30 am
Pittsburg and East	*5:30 pm	*11:59 am
Dayton and Xenia	*5:30 pm	*11:59 am
Logansport and Chicago	*12:30 am	*3:30 am

VANDALIA LINE SHORTEST ROUTE TO ST. LOUIS AND THE WEST.

From Indianapolis Union Station.

Trains leave for St. Louis, 8:10 am., 12:10 pm 10:45 am, 11:00 pm. Trains connect at Terre Haute for E. & T. H. points. Evansville sleeper on 11:00 pm train.

Greencastle and Terre Haute Accommodation leaves 4:00 pm.

Arrive from St. Louis 3:30 am, 4:50 am, 2:56 pm, 5:20 pm, 7:45 pm.

Terre Haute and Greencastle Accommodation arrives at 10:00 am.

Sleeping and Parlor Cars are run on through trains.

MONON ROUTE The Vestibuled

PULLMAN CAR LINE

Leave Indianapolis—

No. 32—Chicago Lim., Pullman Vestibuled coaches, parlor and dining car, daily ..... 11:35 am

Arrive in Chicago 5:20 pm.

No. 34—Chicago Night Ex., Pullman Vestibuled coaches and sleepers, daily ..... 12:50 am

Arrive in Chicago 7:35 am.

No. 38—Monon Accommodation ..... 5:20 pm

Arrive at Indianapolis—

No. 31—Vestibule, daily ..... 4:20 pm

No. 33—Vestibule, daily ..... 3:35 am

No. 39—Monon Accommodation ..... 10:40 am

Pullman Vestibuled Sleepers for Chicago stand at west end of Union Station, and can be taken at 8:30 p. m. daily.

TICKET OFFICES—No. 26 South Illinois street and at Union Station.